SELF PUBLISHER!™

★ MAGAZINE ★

THE POP REPORT

A WRITTEN VIEW

IN THIS ISSUE

David AJ Berner
VINTON HUECK
BYRON PENARANDA

THE ACCIDENTAL CARTOONIST

Canada Keck

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SELF PUBLISHER MAGAZINE

The Driving Force

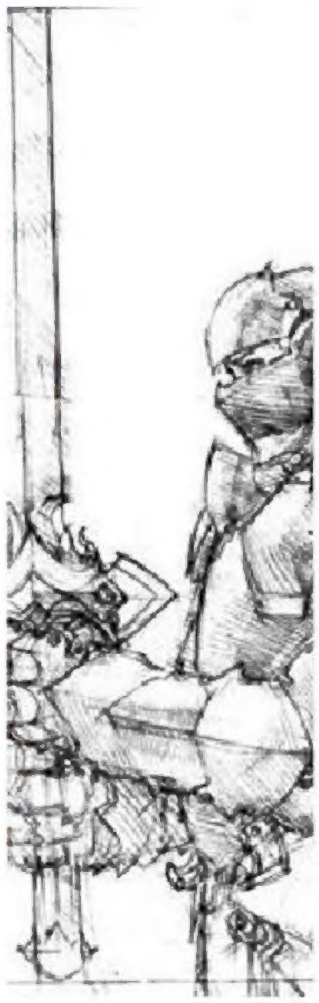
"Milestone" issues are always a big deal to me. Here we are at SP! #75 and I wanted to take just a moment to reflect, with some math. It was 1989 when I first introduced SP! as a Small Press news source, because back then, there was no internet and publishers only found each other by going to conventions, then learning about newsletters they could get in the mail. That's a quarter-century ago now. I was only 22 at that time. So, I have been doing this magazine more than half my life.

I've said a couple times now, that this run of the zine has become the most fulfilling. I mean, over 25 years, it's had its ups and downs. It's had a number of name changes, until we returned to the original one. Different formats, focuses... You name it, I've probably tried it with this mag. Well, I'm not done trying things, not by a long shot. With this issue, we're going to begin listing every new book we can find out about, no matter where or how it is available. I've contacted online outlets and am in firm talks with a number of them. So far, for sure, Drive-Thru Comics is on board with this. As I write this, I've firmed up how we're going to display them, and I've got the basics in place to look at. We're not going to be able to show everything in the pages of SP!, and we want to make the system as LEVEL a playing field as possible, so that all publishers get equal opportunity and READERS get a place where they can learn about ALL new titles, no matter what outlets they are in. We think this is an important step in indie coverage. It may take a bit of refinement and evolution, but we're on it, once again, pretty sure we're the first place to ever try something like this. It's just what SP! is all about. Let us know what you think!

This issue, we are covering a project that I hope everyone will take a few extra moments to look at. Our Cover Feature came about from a conversation at the SPACE show in Columbus, Ohio this year. A group of creators in the area are organizing a Suicide Prevention anthology. It really struck a chord with me and, with a couple of scheduling shifts, we were able to get coverage of it into SP! sooner rather than later. I want to thank everyone involved, including Ellen Fleischer for taking on the topic, and Canada Keck for being available to speak about it at short notice. She arranged the awesome cover for this issue, drawn by my old friend, Ray Tomczak and colored by Canada's daughter, Kira. It's one of those articles that I think just needs to be read by everyone, everywhere.

Coming up next issue? We're going to have a cover story on Omar Morales, and interviews with Gary Scott Beatty, Aghori Shaivite, ComicsFix, And more. Just, go tell all your friends how cool SP! is and how they need to really start reading this thing! It's not like—after 25 years—I'm gonna stop doing this thing now!

- Ian Shires



contents

4 The Accidental Cartoonist (cover story)

An interview with Canada Keck by Ellen Fleischer

10 A Written View

By Douglas Owen

12 Shades of David AJ Berner

An interview with David AJ Berner by Mark Turner

17 A Story and Time to Tell It (Vinton Hueck & Byron Penaranda)

An interview with Vinton Hueck & Byron Penaranda By Jennifer Vanderbeek

20 The Pop Report

Looking at the top 5 of various distribution outlets

23 Indie Advice, Simple Promotion Steps

An article by Gary Scott Beatty

Join the Self Publisher forums at: **www.selfpubmag.com**

The Accidental Cartoonist

A chat with Canada Keck

By: Ellen Fleischer

Canada Keck calls herself an accidental cartoonist. She cut her teeth on jam comics (unscripted comics with each panel drawn by a different artist) and created her first comic book in 2010. She has been writing autobio comics for over three years now, in addition to editing anthologies and curating comic art shows. Canada was happy to chat with us this month about her craft and about a special project planned for the spring of 2015.

SP!: CAN YOU TELL US A BIT ABOUT YOURSELF? WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR YOU GROWING UP?

CK: I grew up in a series of small towns in northern Indiana. When I was 14, my stepfather's job took us to Texas, where I had my first dose of true culture shock, as well as my first episode of major depression. Unfortunately, my mom was part of the generation that thought of mental illness as taboo, so I did not receive treatment until I finally sought it out on my own in college. It took me a couple of years to find a therapist that I resonated with enough to stick with therapy and by the time I graduated (I took the long route–seven years), I was doing well. I then moved to Japan for my second dose of culture shock. After that I came to Columbus, Ohio for graduate school and forgot to leave.

SP!: WHAT FIRST SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN COMICS? WERE THERE PARTICULAR GENRES, CHARACTERS, THEMES, ETC. TO WHICH YOU GRAVITATED? WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THEM THAT RESONATED WITH YOU?

CK: When I was a girl I would "waste" (in my mom's opinion) my allowance on Classics Illustrated and MAD magazine. I loved MAD for its humor and Classics Illustrated for the combination of art and story that I found more enjoyable than dry text. I also loved reading the comics in the newspaper. Then, when I was older, I only read newspaper comics and was largely unaware of the wider world of comics. I did read Maus by Art Spiegelman when it first came out, after reading about it in Time magazine. I read collections of Bloom County (Berkeley Breathed), Doonesbury (Garry Trudeau), and The Far Side (Gary Larson). I also loved New Yorker cartoons, as well as the cartoons of B. Kliban. But I never thought of creating my own comics until my younger daughter inadvertently led me to it.

SP!: REALLY? COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THAT, PLEASE?

CK: When my younger daughter was in sixth grade, she really got into reading manga. Having loved my comics as a girl, I happily indulged her in this, but never read any of them myself. She slowly branched out into various American comics. In her freshman year of high school, when she had to do a 30- to 40-hour project outside of school, she chose to do one on comics and approached Max Ink, a Columbus comic artist (whose son was at the same school), about mentoring her. He suggested she attend a couple of Sunday Comix meetings to meet other comic artists and to get critiques on her work. She was 14, so I was the transportation/chaperone and I just sat in the corner. She wanted to keep going, so I kept taking her and sitting in the corner.

Max Ink, who started the group, began giving me comics to read, starting with Usagi Yojimbo (Stan Sakai), which I fell in love with. After a while, the members encouraged me to join them at the table. At first, I just chatted, but finally, I started dipping my toes in

by adding a panel to a jam comic here and there. The first couple of times I added a panel, I just wrote the words and asked someone else to draw for me. I went to a 24-hour comic event in October 2010, at Packrat Comics in Hilliard, Ohio, not expecting to do a comic, but to be supportive of the group (and chaperone my daughter). But I decided to give it a shot, since I was going to be there all night, and wrote about something I knew well–my cats. Since then, I've continued to write autobio comics, though not about my cats, including another 24-hour comic at Wild Goose Creative.

SP!: WHO (OR WHAT) WOULD YOU SAY ARE THE MAJOR INFLUENCES ON YOUR WORK?

CK: Max Ink, who creates the slice-of-life comic Blink (which is a sweet story about all the interstitial moments that make us the people we are), continues to mentor me and inspire me with all he strives to do. His line work is beautiful, his storytelling is subtle, his use of panels is incredible, and I always lean a lot from any discussion about comic art that he is involved in.

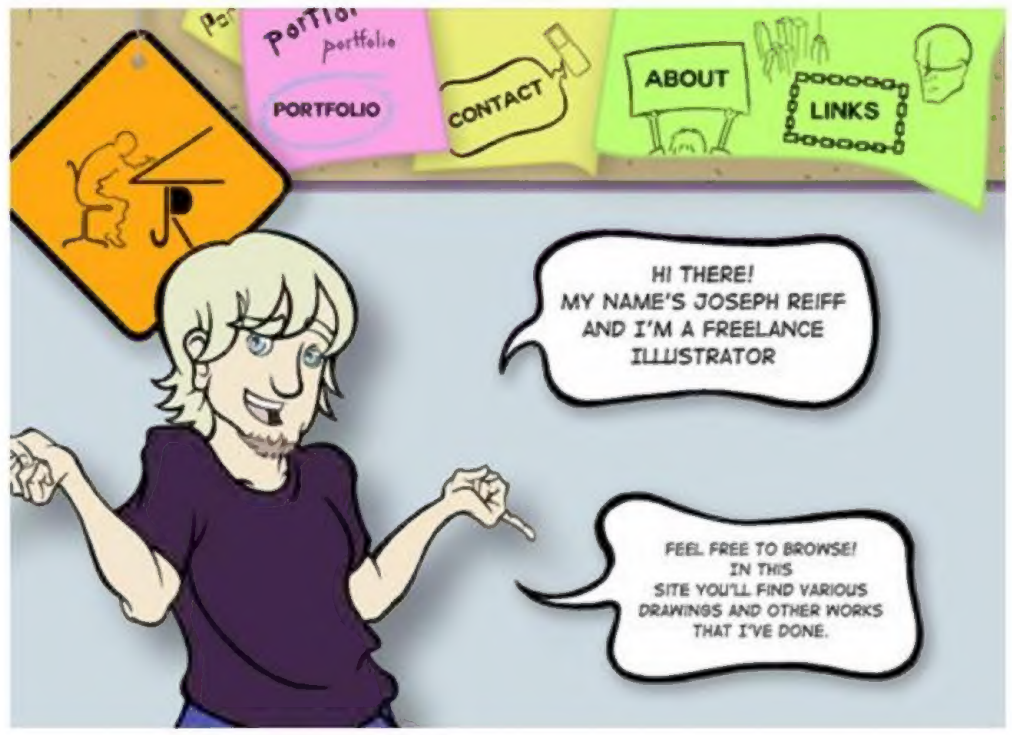
I look up to Sarah Leavitt, who created a wondrous graphic memoir called Tangles, about her mother's Alzheimer's and how it affected all of her family. I love the way that she balances flashbacks to the past with the progression through her mother's decline, as well as the way so much emotion is conveyed through her drawings and panels and pacing. She draws with a very similar style to mine, which I also find encouraging.

SP!: YOU HAVE A BACKGROUND IN SOCIOLOGY. HOW WOULD YOU SAY THAT THIS IMPACTS YOUR COMICS?

CK: What drew me into sociology is very much akin to the kinds of comics I write. When I was an undergraduate, I was thinking I would go into psychology in graduate school, until I took a course called The Sociology of Mental Illness. Looking at how mental illnesses differ not only across time and cultures, but also by race and gender, really made me start thinking about how we as individuals are situated in the specific historical and cultural milieus we encounter. I think I was already looking at the world through a sociological lens without knowing it, even before college, but the more I studied sociology, the more nuanced that lens became.

Much of sociology is about story-telling, whether one is looking at survey data, collecting open-ended interviews, or doing participant observation. The stories that sociologists want to tell are about how humans operate in the social world. My comics are about how I operate in the world and I bring my sociological analysis to understanding myself and my life.

SP!: HOW DO YOU APPROACH YOUR CRAFT? HOW DO YOU SET ABOUT CREATING A NEW COMIC?



CK: Sometimes I have ideas for comics pop into by my head when I'm going about my everyday life; I jot those down as soon as I can. Then I periodically sit down and flip through my sketchbook to decide what to work on. If I am writing a comic for an anthology with a theme, I usually start by writing out random thoughts around what the theme means to me. At some point, these gel into a story I want to tell. When I start out with prose writing, I feel like I am pruning. Each time I read through, I cut out more words, until I have what I feel are the essential words to pair with images.

Once I'm focussed on a particular story, I go back and forth very loosely between writing and thumb-nailing. Periodically, I show what I'm working on to other Sunday Comixers or members of Sketch & Kvetch for feedback. I feel like I'm still trying to develop a process. I started the comic I'm working on now just a couple of weeks before SPACE, because I was reflecting on how I sometimes struggle to decide what to wear. I thought initially that it would be a relatively short comic, but as I've been working on it and getting feedback, it's grown into a wider story about struggling with body image issues.

SP!: DID YOU PLAN ON SELF-PUBLISHING FROM THE BEGINNING? IF SO, WHY?

CK: Because of how I fell into creating comics, I did not make a conscious decision about self-publishing. Once I wrote the first 24-hour comic, Max really encouraged me to make it into a book and taught me how to use a publishing program to set it up. I had 50 copies made at Staples and had them out at the Sunday Comix table at SPACE in 2011. Between selling and trading, I ran out of copies by the end of the weekend. I had been to SPACE for the first time the year before, and my daughter and I had come home with a huge stack of self-published comics. I loved the idea of people just creating and producing what they were inspired to create without worrying about selling in a bookstore or comic shop. I enjoy the self-publishing process and have continued to print up my own books, as well as Sunday Comix anthologies.

SP!: WHAT WOULD YOU CONSIDER THE BEST ADVICE YOU RECEIVED (ABOUT COMICS AND/OR SELF-PUBLISHING)?

CK: I think that the very best advice I've gotten is to focus on my strengths–like writing and pacing–and not worry so much about what I consider my lack of drawing skills. I've been encouraged to look at the wide range of art styles that are used in comics and to embrace the style that works best for me. The other great advice I've received is to step back from what I'm creating and look at it from the reader's perspective, remembering that they don't know the backstory the way I do.

SP!: ARE THERE ANY POINTERS THAT YOU WISH YOU WOULD HAVE RECEIVED, BUT HAD TO LEARN FOR YOURSELF THE HARD WAY?

CK: I feel like I haven't been making comics long enough to answer this.

SP!: YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED WITH COMIC CREATORS FOR FREEDOM. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS ORGANIZATION AND THE SCOPE OF YOUR PARTICIPATION?

CK: Comic Creators for Freedom is a fundraising effort started by Lora Innes in 2009 to benefit Love146, an organization that works to end human trafficking. Each year, she invites comic artists to contribute an image of their character to be part of a themed collage that people can download as wallpaper by making a donation. I had donated before this past year, but in 2013, I finally decided I felt confident enough to participate as an artist. The theme was Awkward School Photos and I created an image of myself at 16, looking (I hope) awkward and angsty. I plan to continue to participate.

SP!: IN ADDITION TO PUBLISHING YOUR OWN COMICS, YOU'VE ALSO EDITED ANTHOLOGIES. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

CK: At all of the Sunday Comix meetings, members spend part of the time doing jam comics. Fairly quickly once I was participating in the group, I took over as the keeper of the jams, meaning I kept a file of in-progress jams and a file of completed jams. After putting together my first book, enjoying the formatting and layout, I suggested that we put together a small anthology of the best jam comics. I went through the file of completed jams and selected what I considered the best, then brought my accepts and rejects to a meeting to see what people thought. A couple of the guys, Ray Tomczak and Jonathon Riddle, thought I'd rejected some perfectly good jams, all of which were a bit naughty. They suggested we do two books. We came up with two titles, Sunday Gold and Blue Sunday, and they chose the ones to be included in Blue Sunday. The covers were collaborative efforts by Max Ink, Sue Olcott, Alex Heberling, Jonathon, Ray and myself. I ended up doing the layout and design for both books and had an absolute blast doing it.

We then started talking about doing an anthology to benefit the Hero Initiative and came up with Sea Monkeys as our theme. We called it A Bowl Full of Happiness, a tag line from an old Sea Monkey ad. We set up a website and put out a call for submissions. I was the editor and worked out the design and layout for the book, and we debuted it at SPACE 2012.

Since then, I've put together a large jam collection for Sunday Comix's tenth anniversary, in addition to working as the head

editor for the Connections anthology. Apparently I always wanted to be an editor when I grew up.

SP!: THE SUNDAY COMIX GROUP IS ABOUT MORE THAN CREATING COMICS. YOU'RE ALSO INVOLVED IN RAISING AWARENESS FOR VARIOUS SOCIAL ISSUES. WHAT CAN YOU SHARE WITH US ABOUT THE SCG'S SUICIDE PREVENTION PROJECT?

CK: Doing an anthology to benefit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) was something we started talk about in 2011, after the nephew of one of our members killed himself and we did a raffle at SPACE that year to raise money for them. The Connections project, though, didn't become fully formed until after SPACE 2013. Just before SPACE that year, a young member of our group, Joe Reiff, who was not quite a year out of college, killed himself. We asked all the people tabling at SPACE to donate comics or art, and we did a series of raffles and again donated the proceeds to the AFSP. In the weeks afterwards, though, we revisited the idea of an anthology and created an editorial committee to make it happen. After a lot of brainstorming, we came up with Connections as our title and very general theme.

SP!: HOW ARE YOU INVOLVED?

CK: I am the chair of the editorial committee, working along with Jen Smither, Ray Tomczak, Mary Lightner, and Lia Eastep, with continued support and advice from Max Ink. I'm also going to be one of the contributors. My piece for the anthology will be about my struggles with depression and my one suicide attempt when I was 16, and how thankful I am that I survived, even though I continued to struggle for years afterwards.

SP!: ARE YOU CURRENTLY SEEKING SUBMISSIONS? WHAT GUIDELINES COULD YOU PROVIDE TO A CREATOR WHO WANTED TO CONTRIBUTE?

CK: We are currently seeking one to ten-page comics about growth, renewal, and reinvention in the face of the losses and changes that we all experience. We have a rolling submission policy, but we want all completed artwork by the end of December, 2014. We encourage creators who want to do a new story to initially send us a pitch. We will let them know in about a week whether we want to see a script or have any concerns. Creators with an accepted pitch will need to send us a script for review, as well. Previously completed comics can be submitted as long as they are appropriate for the anthology. Our plan is to debut the Connections anthology in the spring of 2015.

I would want potential contributors to remember that we don't mind either darkness or humor, but either must be appropriate and we are looking for stories that are life-affirming. We have some extensive submission guidelines at our website, http://connectionscomic.wordpress.com/.

SP!: WHAT'S NEXT ON THE HORIZON FOR YOU?

CK: That's a great question! I plan on continuing to create comics, with the goal of writing a long graphic memoir somewhere down the road. I also want to continue editing anthologies. I've also curated two shows of comic art for a local arts organization and I want to do some more shows. The second show I curated, Panels in Pink, focused on female comic creators and led to the formation of Sketch & Kvetch, a group of female comic creators here in Columbus who meet monthly.

SP!: IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE WITH OUR READERS THAT WE HAVEN'T YET TOUCHED ON?

CK: I could tell you about my cats….

SP!: FINALLY, HOW CAN FOLKS KEEP UP WITH YOU AND YOUR WORK?

CK: People can find me through Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/canada.keck or https://www.facebook.com/SundayComix. Making a website is on my to-do list.

"It's amazing ... the story is great!"
- Ming Chen, AMC TV's Comic Book Men

"God, is this comic ever good!"
- Paul Gulacy, Batman® PREY™

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A WRITTEN VIEW

Putting it out there!

Navigating the submission process

By Douglas Owen

Have you ever prostrated yourself in front of your computer (or whatever you use to write), swearing that everyone will hate your story? Have you ever had your inner voice tell you that the rejection letters will come in time and time again if you send it out?

You are not alone.

We, as writers, tend to believe everyone is out to stomp on our work, hammer our souls into the ground, and put us down any way they can. Even the cover art for your book is not sacred with sites like Awful Book Covers. Now, in all honesty, a lot of the book covers they feature could have been done a lot better. And when one of my book covers showed up there I was overtaken by angst. Guess they don't like young adult fiction.

One critique group I belonged to had people begging the more seasoned writers to "Please be kind," their eyes wide with terror. But why? Being a writer means taking rejection and moving forward to improve your craft, right?

There are rejections and then there are rejections.

Every year, many publishers run writing contests seeking that next big name. They want to find new, undiscovered talent and showcase it. But as they do this, many writers who have just started, or just did not care to engage an editor, continue to send in their stories. Here are some ways to survive the rejection pile.

1. THE REJECTION

You'll have to learn to live with this one. J.K. Rowling had her novel, The Cuckoo's Calling, turned down by ten publishers until they discovered who the writer was.

Even Agatha Christie took 23 attempts to get her first novel, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, accepted for print.

The Lord of the Flies, the celebrated work by William Golding that most high school English teachers use, was laughed at by almost every publisher in London.

Steven R. Donaldson received 47 rejections for his first novel, Lord Foul's Bane. When it was published, the first novel in the series was nominated for the World Fantasy Award in 1978. It has sold millions of copies since.

So wear your rejections like a badge of honor. They did not kill you; they made you stronger.

2. LOW-RISK PROJECTS

I've seen a lot of writers try to start with a novel. It is not easy. Go low-risk. Learn your craft. Write a dozen or more short stories and see what happens. If you win a contest, that's fantastic. Even if you place in a contest, you have done well. Nothing will get a novel noticed more if you can put "Winner of the … Contest" on the introduction letter. This will give you a feel for what editors and readers are looking for.

3. ACCEPT REJECTIONS AND LEARN

A rejected story is a great story that teaches us something about writing. If your stories have not succeeded in being published yet, it is because you have not failed enough. Also, beware of early success; it can be dangerous. If your first novel is a success and your second novel does not earn out its advance, your confidence could collapse.

Live with the failure and embrace it. You are a grown up and life is not always about acceptance.

4. MOTIVATION BY READING

Do you know who said, "Read the latest bestseller. Then ask yourself 'How come this garbage was even published?'" It was Stephen King. Persistence gets you published. Garbage will find a home through the persistence of the author. The worst that

will happen is that you will find at least one good read.

5. PLAY THE GAME

Pessimism is a positive emotion. Use it to help you persist against the odds. Remember, the odds of a new writer being accepted by a reputable agent stand at around one in a snowball's chance in Hell (1 in 3000).

Square your shoulders and push through.

6. FAIRY DUST IS FOR TINKERBELL

You wrote about your life. You expressed yourself. Nice. Sorry, not an easy sell.

Writing about yourself will only create what most readers will call garbage. If you want to get published, write what the market wants. You can be as individual as you want, but keep to the theme that Joe Everyday wants to read. (Do not forget about Jane Everyday, either.)

Try and be realistic when writing. Publishers publish what they want; write for them.

7. BE CONTENT TO START SOMEWHERE

Winning a few awards will impress agents when you present them with a novel. Hell, they might even read the first paragraph instead of handing it over to an intern. But if the contest judge turns his head away, improve the story and submit it elsewhere. You could eventually win—for every time you rework the story and resubmit it you have refined your skills.

So, a lot of people have asked me, "How do I win a contest? Everyone wants the winning formula. Well, here is one winning formula that I can share with you. Get you your pen and paper, write it down, and read it every day.

1. SPELLING

Make sure you have no spelling mistakes in the work. Period. One misspelled word can get your story rejected.

2. GRAMMAR

Be very mindful of this trap. Your narrative should be clean, with no grammatical errors. Notice I said "narrative," here. When it comes to dialogue, you can have grammatical errors, as long as they fit the character who is speaking.

3. FORMAT

If the contest states a specific font and size to use, use it. How bad would it be to have a rejected story because you used Arial instead of Garamond?

4. WORD COUNT

One word under or over will get you a big fat zero from the contest.

5. EDIT AND EDIT AGAIN

Some people skip this step. Why? Get at least two editors to go over the work and make sure it flows. Use sites that have pieceworkers and have them bid to edit your work. Request line and content edits.

6. STRUCTURE

This is how the work appears on the printed page. Change your page size to 6x9 and see how it looks. If all your paragraphs end at the end of the page, you have a structure issue. Likewise if you have a paragraph that stretches more than half a page (unless it is a soliloquy), it is screaming for revision. Some contests publish their winners in magazine or book form. Check out what will happen with your winning submission and plan for that eventuality.

7. GENRE

Do not submit a science fiction story to a love story contest. You will not win.

8. CONSISTENCY

I cannot tell you how many times I have told writers to be consistent. If you write "Jane said," and then switch halfway through to "said Jane," you will end up losing the contest. Check to make sure you keep it the same way.

9. TURN ON SMART QUOTES

Depending on the program you use, smart quotes are the way quotation marks show up on the page. In tip 8 you can see the open quote with the tail going upward, and the closing quote with the tail going downward. These are smart quotes. Use them.

10. SUBMIT AHEAD OF THE DEADLINE

Judges get the pieces they have to rate when they are received. Nothing will make a judge cringe more than receiving a word-count-limit piece on the last day of the contest. They usually skim those (yes, I know it sounds unfair, but that is how they do it). Be nice to the judges and submit early. The earlier the better. The work will stick out in their minds more, because they've had time to enjoy it.

And one last word of advice. Don't submit stories containing a high level of profanity. Nothing will turn off a judge more than seeing a proliferation of swear words throughout your work. Don't write about a porn star in space (unless there is no porn being shot or talked about). Most contests that publish the works of writers are looking for something aimed toward a general audience, so keep that in mind as well.

Shades of

David A J Berner

By: Mark Turner

Formerly the Senior Editor of webcomic studio Midnite Comics, UK writer David A J Berner founded the Broken Voice Comics website in 2006. His adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's The Oval Portrait was included in the graphic anthology Nevermore, published by Self Made Hero in 2007. His original short story Speakeasy was included in Wes Huffor's Charnel House anthology in 2008.

Since its launch in 2006, Broken Voice Comics has been home to Berner's own comics, notably his two-volume graphic novel Shades, which won nine reader-voted awards when it was serialized at the Drunk Duck website. Berner is currently working on a fantasy novel titled Abhorrent Practices.

Recently Mr. Berner shared in depth regarding Shades and the creative process.

SP!: SHADES REPRESENTS A MASSIVE UNDERTAKING OF STORY-TELLING, IN TWO VOLUMES WHICH YOU WROTE AND CREATED. PREVIOUS TO THIS PROJECT HAD YOU ANY EXPERIENCE IN THE COMICS INDUSTRY?

DB: No, no prior offenses to be taken into account! Apart from a few silly comic strips I drew when I was at school (decades ago now, I'm afraid!), Shades was my first attempt at writing a script for any kind of comic. Of course, if I'd known what would be involved, I probably wouldn't have chosen something as ambitious as a 200-page graphic novel for my first project!

SP!: WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO WANT TO TAKE ON WRITING COMICS?

DB: I'd always wanted to write a novel (a "proper" prose novel!) but it was only after Tim Burton's Batman introduced me to The Dark Knight Returns that I first realized just how far comics had come since I'd last read them back in the sixties and early seventies. I immediately began seeking out other graphic novels (Watchmen, Maus, Kingdom Come, Persepolis) and eventually, I started to wonder if I could write one of my own. As the plot of Shades began to take shape in my mind, I came to the conclusion that the comic format just happened to be the best medium for this particular story.

SP!: WHO ARE YOUR CREATIVE INFLUENCES?

DB: In terms of influences, I'm honestly not sure I have any from the world of comics. I'm a huge admirer of Alan Moore (who isn't?!), but let's face it, he's the very definition of inimitable! The last writer I remember consciously wanting to emulate was Enid Blyton, back when I was about eight!

In general terms, though, I've always been one of those annoying people who can't help analyzing the story-telling in films, TV shows, and books, mentally listing those things that I think work well and—just as importantly—those things that don't. As I read my way back into comics, I found myself doing the same. I'd take note of techniques which I liked (I immediately took to the color-coded caption boxes which have largely replaced the thought-balloons I grew up with!), and I'd make a mental note to avoid all those techniques which I felt hindered the story (I'm not a big fan of third party narration and I absolutely hate panels without text!)

SP!: HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO CREATE THIS EPIC TALE?

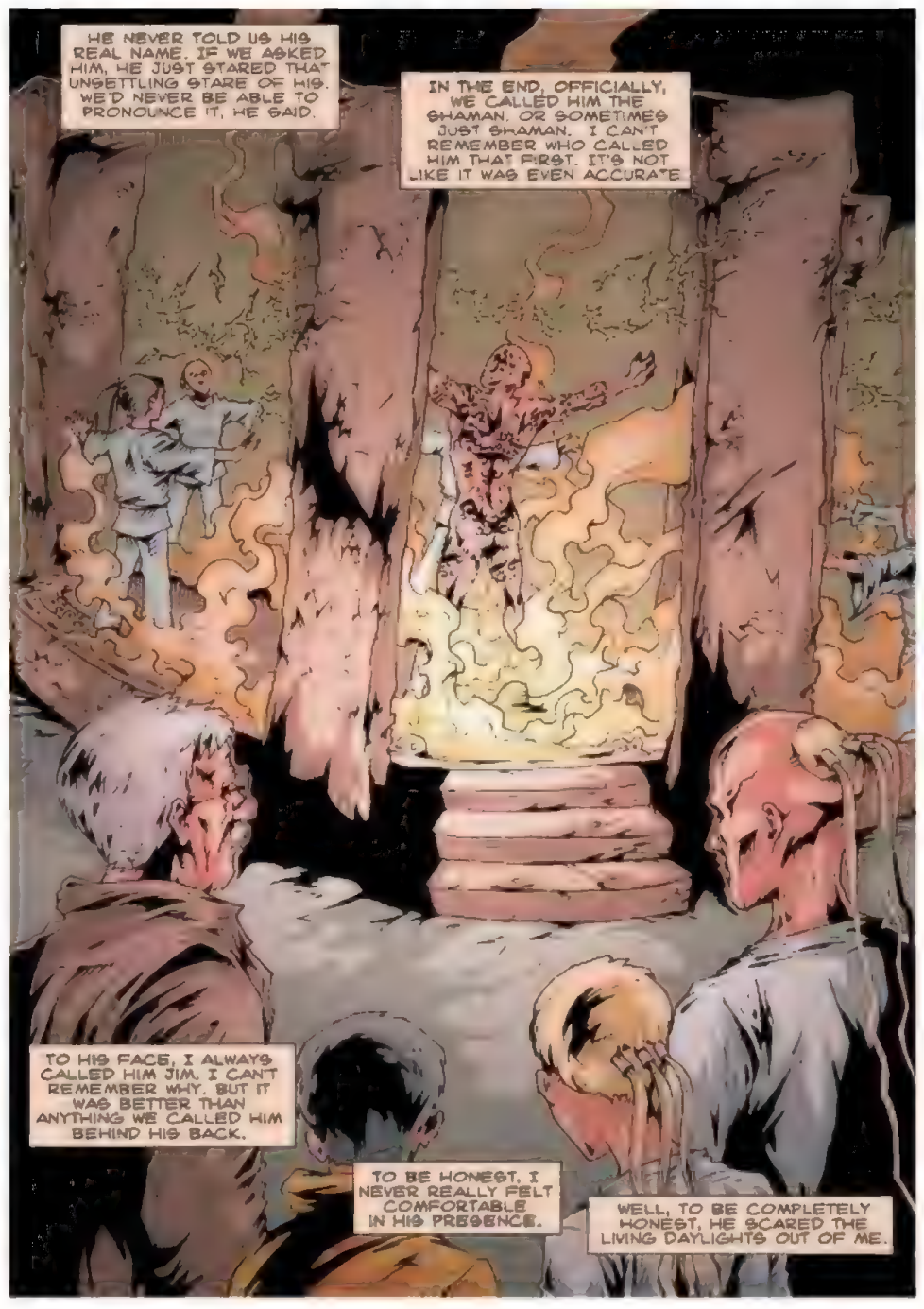
DB: Ha! It sometimes feels like it took a lifetime! In reality, it took some seven years to create. I spent around a year writing the first draft of the script and getting it to a point where I was prepared to show it to someone else. The artwork took another six years or so and, while the artists were doing their thing, I was up to my eyeballs in redrafts, rewrites, and revisions of the chapters they hadn't seen yet.

For reasons which have nothing to do with Shades itself, it was another three years before I finally managed to get the whole story into print. In total, then, I've been living with Shades for around ten years now—as I say, a lifetime!

SP!: WHO IS YOUR CREATIVE TEAM ON THIS PROJECT? AS A WRITER, HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT FINDING THE TEAM THAT HELPED YOU CREATE SHADES?

DB: In the beginning there was just one artist, Harsho Mohan Chattoraj, who did everything: pencils, inks, and lettering. I found Harsho by placing an ad in various forums (I can't remember them all, but Penciljack and Komikwerks were definitely in the mix!) He sent me some portfolio drawings and I immediately knew his distinctive style would be a perfect fit for the look I wanted for Shades. At the time, Harsho estimated it would take about eighteen months to two years to finish

RAAARGH!
JESUS, BOO! IS HE ALWAYS LIKE THIS?
I - I DON'T KNOW
I'VE NEVER SEEN HIM WITHOUT HIS SWORD BEFORE!
AT LAST! WE ARE AGAIN AS ONE!
THE GREAT SWORD! IT IS A PART OF ME AND I -
TUROS - IF YOU DARE SAY YOU ARE A PART OF IT, I SHALL ...
WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'LL DO ...
BUT I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING FOR NOTHING ...
I AM A PART OF IT AND IT'S NOT PLEASANT!
BOO! THE SWORD!
IT - IT'S TALKING!
I KNOW ... THE HARD PART IS GETTING IT TO STOP!


HE NEVER TOLD US HIS REAL NAME. IF WE ASKED HIM, HE JUST STARED THAT UNSETTLING STARE OF HIS. WE'D NEVER BE ABLE TO PRONOUNCE IT, HE SAID.
IN THE END, OFFICIALLY, WE CALLED HIM THE SHAMAN. OR SOMETIMES JUST SHAMAN. I CAN'T REMEMBER WHO CALLED HIM THAT FIRST. IT'S NOT LIKE IT WAS EVEN ACCURATE
TO HIS FACE, I ALWAYS CALLED HIM JIM. I CAN'T REMEMBER WHY. BUT IT WAS BETTER THAN ANYTHING WE CALLED HIM BEHIND HIS BACK.
TO BE HONEST, I NEVER REALLY FELT COMFORTABLE IN HIS PRESENCE.
WELL, TO BE COMPLETELY HONEST, HE SCARED THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS OUT OF ME.

SHADES FACT: "JIM" WAS THE NAME USED BY MY FATHER TO ADDRESS ANYONE WHOSE NAME HE DIDN'T KNOW. STRANGERS IN THE STREET WOULD BE ASKED: "WHAT'S THE TIME, JIM?" TAXI DRIVERS WOULD BE TOLD: "TAKE A LEFT HERE, JIM." SO, SINCE ADDRESSING A CHARACTER AS "SHAMAN" WOULD BE AWKWARD, I DECIDED STAN COULD CALL THIS ONE "JIM"!

the artwork but, as the work progressed, it became increasingly clear we'd both underestimated just how big a project it was. Four years later, he was just reaching the halfway point!

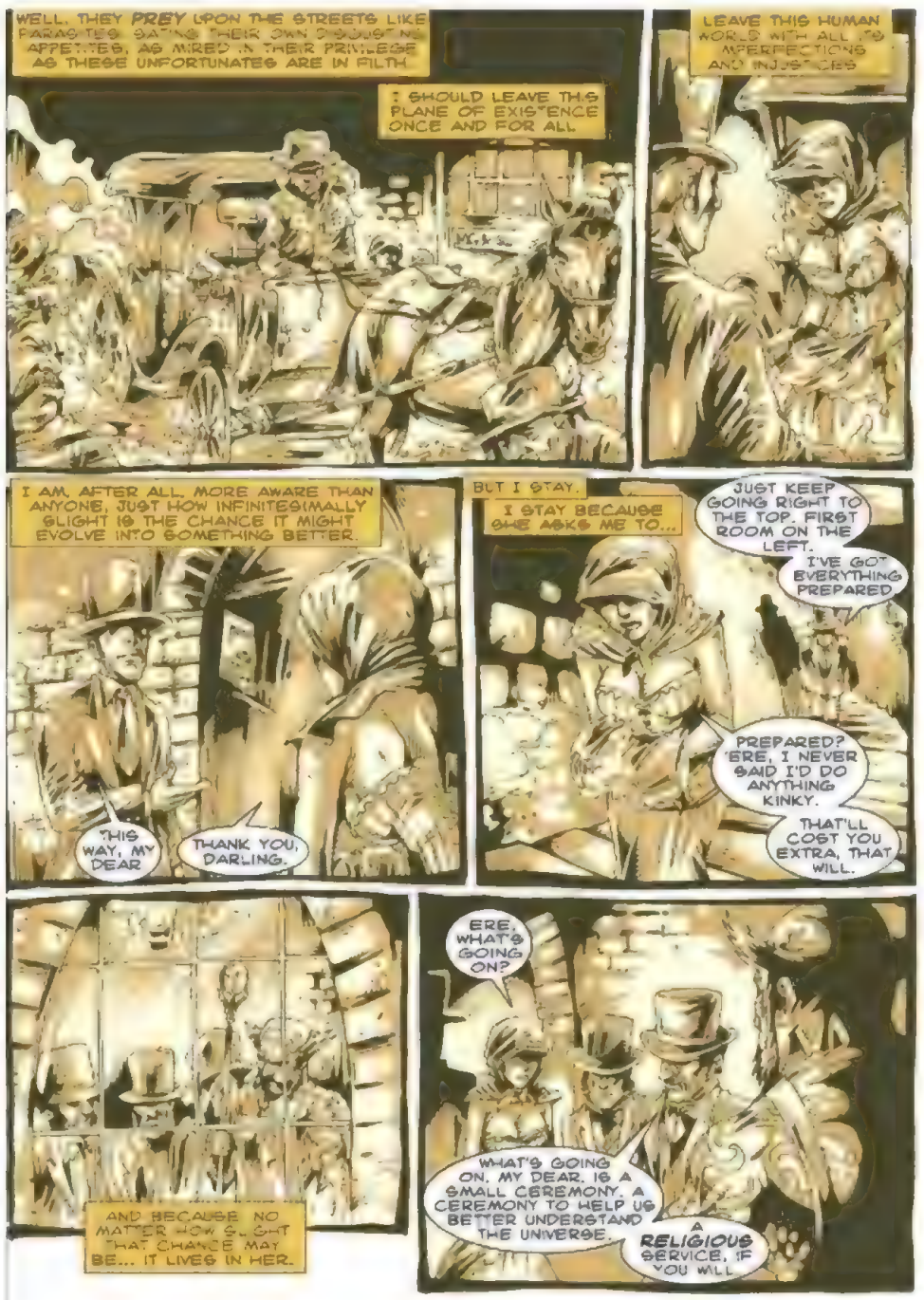
At around that time, due to personal and other commitments, Harsho told me he would have to leave the project. That was when I decided to split the story into two volumes. I'd been toying with the idea anyway, but, with the need to find a new art team, it just made even more sense. With a better understanding of how much work was involved this time, I decided to make life a little easier on whoever replaced Harsho on the second volume by sharing the workload around a little

I was joined by E.C. Nickel (pencils and inks), a Brazilian artist I'd met through Midnite Comics (a small webcomic studio I'd become involved with), and Muamal Khairi (colors), an Indonesian artist who replied to another ad I'd placed on various comicky forums. I took on the task of lettering Volume 2 myself. (As well as rewriting the script innumerable times and becoming part of Midnite Comics, I'd been teaching myself how to letter in Photoshop; no rest for the wicked!)

SP!: WHAT WERE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED IN CREATING A PROJECT OF THIS SIZE?

DB: Probably the biggest challenge was continuing to believe it would ever be finished! When Harsho had to leave the project, it felt like a particularly devastating blow. I had real doubts as to whether I'd be able to find an artist willing to devote several years to this one project, especially one with their own style, yet whose artwork wouldn't look out of place alongside everything that had gone before—and even more especially, someone within my limited budget!

More generally, though, even when things were going well, there was a constant fear that something would happen to trip the project up before it reached the end. One thing that helped in that regard was serializing the book online as a webcomic. The community at Drunk Duck was particularly supportive. When you start to receive regular feedback from fans who are as invested in your story and characters as you are, you feel like it would be a betrayal to leave them hanging. It's a powerful incentive to see it through to the end!


WELL, THEY PREY UPON THE STREETS LIKE PARASITES SATING THEIR OWN DISGUSTING APPETITES, AS MIRED IN THEIR PRIVILEGE AS THESE UNFORTUNATES ARE IN FILTH.
I SHOULD LEAVE THIS PLANE OF EXISTENCE ONCE AND FOR ALL.
LEAVE THIS HUMAN WORLD WITH ALL ITS IMPERFECTIONS AND INJUSTICES
I AM, AFTER ALL, MORE AWARE THAN ANYONE, JUST HOW INFINITESIMALLY SLIGHT IS THE CHANCE IT MIGHT EVOLVE INTO SOMETHING BETTER.
BUT I STAY.
I STAY BECAUSE SHE ASKS ME TO...
JUST KEEP GOING RIGHT TO THE TOP. FIRST ROOM ON THE LEFT.
I'VE GOT EVERYTHING PREPARED
PREPARED? 'ERE, I NEVER SAID I'D DO ANYTHING KINKY.
THAT'LL COST YOU EXTRA, THAT WILL.
THIS WAY, MY DEAR
THANK YOU, DARLING.
AND BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW SLIGHT THAT CHANCE MAY BE... IT LIVES IN HER.
ERE, WHAT'S GOING ON?
WHAT'S GOING ON, MY DEAR. IS A SMALL CEREMONY. A CEREMONY TO HELP US BETTER UNDERSTAND THE UNIVERSE.
A RELIGIOUS SERVICE, IF YOU WILL

BOOM
JEGUS CHRIST, HE DID IT! GOD BLESS YOU, SKIP!
DIDN'T YOU DIE?
HA! DO I LOOK DEAD?
NO, BUT..
OKAY, DOUG, I THINK THAT'S ENOUGH FOR NOW.
WHY DON'T YOU AND I HAVE A WALK IN THE GARDEN?
SUNIL, YOU'LL BE OKAY READING YOUR COMIC FOR A WHILE, RIGHT?
OH, ER, RIGHT.
DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE INTO GARDENING STAN
YES, WELL... WE ALL HAVE OUR LITTLE SECRETS.

SHADES FACT: THE SHAMAN'S INTERNAL MONOLOGUE RUNNING THROUGH THESE TWO PAGES WAS ANOTHER OF THOSE SPECCHES WHICH WAS ORIGINALLY EVEN LONGER THAN IT IS HERE! I CUT AND REWROTE A LOT OF IT BUT, EVENTUALLY, I FOUND THAT EVERY LINE I TRIED TO REWRITE WAS BECOMING LONGER RATHER THAN SHORTER, SO I QUIT WHILE I WAS AHEAD!

SHADES FACT: WHEN WRITING THESE EARLY SCENES FOR DOUG, THERE WAS ALWAYS A DANGER THAT HE MIGHT COME ACROSS AS NOTHING MORE THAN A TWO DIMENSONAL, SINISISTIC "BIGGLES" STEREOTYPE. AS THE STORY DEVELOPS, IT BECOMES INCREASINGLY CLEAR (I HOPE!) THAT HE IS, IN FACT, FAR MORE NUANCED THAN THAT

SP!: SHADES PAYS HOMAGE TO SUPERHEROES OF A BYGONE ERA AND INTRODUCES A FEW FOR A NEW GENERATION, ALL SET AGAINST A BACKDROP THAT IS CRITICAL OF THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS. BY EVOKING THE NOBLE ASPECTS OF THE LEGENDS FROM THE PAST, DO YOU FEEL THAT THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US GOT MORE RIGHT THAN THEY DID WRONG?

DB: In a word, no! In fact, the idea that things were better in "the good old days" is very much the motivation that drives Bedlam, one of the principal villains in Shades. I'm pretty sure the heroes of the past were every bit as flawed as we are today. We're constantly reinterpreting the legends of the past in a way that suits our own era. The actual historical truth is far from black and white and the title "Shades" is partly a reference to the many shades of gray in between.

So, for example, the book mainly portrays Boudicca (Boadicea) in the way we tend to see her today, as an idealistic warrior, fighting for freedom against an occupying Roman army and spurred into action by the rape of her daughters. However, it's also true that the atrocities she herself committed were every bit as nasty as those committed by her enemies and the punishments meted out to women in the Roman towns she sacked (being skewered lengthwise on spikes?) are certainly not the acts of a champion of women's rights!

Objectively, and within the context of their own times, I suspect all our forerunners got as much right and wrong as we do. I don't believe human nature has changed very much over the past five thousand years!

SP!: WHAT LESSON DO YOU FEEL WE SHOULD BE LEARNING FROM THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE US? WHERE DO YOU THINK WE WENT WRONG?

DB: As I say, I don't think we did necessarily "go wrong". There is a lot wrong with our society, yes, and it's right that we criticize it, in the hope it will be improved. Judged against the past, though, I don't think many people would trade the life they have today for the persecutions of the Middle Ages, the squalor of Victorian London, or even the day-to-day hardships faced by our grandparents. Every cycle has its low points and setbacks but, looked at in a historical context, the lot of the ordinary person has continually improved from one century to the next. So, if there is a lesson we should be learning from the past, it's that we should continue trying to ensure life will be better again for those who follow us.

SP!: WHY DO YOU THINK IT'S EASIER FOR US AS A SOCIETY TO "TAKE OUR MEDICINE" IN THE FORM OF SUPERHERO/FANTASY/SCI-FI STORIES WHEN IT COMES TO LOOKING AT MANY OF THE ISSUES THAT PLAGUE US (POLITICAL, SOCIAL ETC)? WHAT MAKES COMIC BOOKS A GREAT FORMAT FOR EXPLORING THEMES AND ISSUES OF THAT NATURE?

DB: The most common answer to that is probably that it helps to have the issue removed from our own experience. Seeing someone act in a bigoted way to someone from another planet, for example, is easier to digest than seeing someone abused on grounds of race or religion, because our reaction isn't shaped by prejudices we already have. Personally, though, I believe it's even simpler than that. I think we just like to be entertained. It's the "spoonful of sugar" syndrome!

How many people stopped to think about the ethics of the arms trade after seeing the first Iron Man film? Probably not a very high percentage of the total audience, but I'm pretty sure it was a higher number than would have been influenced by a two-hour documentary. Audiences want a good story with interesting characters. If you want to sell them on a high concept too, then that's fine, but don't be so heavy-handed and preachy about it that you dilute the entertainment value. I'm sure that's why Dickens was so popular. I very much doubt if anyone was interested in reading about conditions in a workhouse or debtors' prison (especially those who were likely to find themselves in one at some stage!), but given a story about an orphan overcoming those conditions and they happily went along for the ride.

As an entertainment medium, I think comic books can be great as a vehicle for exploring serious themes, in the same way that films, TV or novels are. If I'm honest, though, I'm not sure they often succeed. The mainstream output from DC and Marvel clearly values entertainment over substance, while the independent creators who do address serious themes are often so concerned with putting across their message that the story suffers as a result.

SP!: OF THE STORY'S VARIOUS CHARACTERS, WHO WOULD YOU SAY YOU MOST IDENTIFY WITH?

DB: Ooh, that's a leading question! It's a bit of a cliché, but there's a little bit of me in almost all the characters—even the bad guys! I suppose Stanley Miller and Boudicca resonate most with me, because Stan was based in large part on my father and there's an awful lot of my mother in Boo! My dad was a keen advocate of common sense and believed strongly in doing the right thing rather than the thing which might benefit him personally. That's very much who Stan is. Boo wears her heart on her sleeve. She can be quick to anger, but also very loving and protective. And that was my mum to a tee. Woe betide anyone who dared threaten someone close to her!

SP!: IF YOU COULD HAVE A SUPERPOWER, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

DB: Oh, that's easy! It would be so cool to be able to create money out of thin air! Not because I'm particularly hung up on hoarding cash for its own sake, or because I lust after material possessions (I have pretty simple needs!), but because of the freedom it gives you to do what you want. It may be the root of all evil, but I'm pretty sure money is the root of an awful lot of good, too!

SP!: IN A MARKET WHERE IT IS TOUGH FOR SUPERHERO TITLES TO COMPETE WITH WHAT THE LARGER PUBLISHERS PRODUCE, WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO TACKLE THIS PARTICULAR GENRE WITH SUCH A LARGE PROJECT?

DB: Honestly, the main reason was simply that it felt like the right genre for this particular story. I've written other, shorter comic scripts in other genres (sci-fi, horror, supernatural, fantasy, etc.), but Shades was conceived as a superhero story from the outset, and I didn't want to shoehorn it into another genre just because the market is dominated by other, bigger players.

Also, as I read my way back into the world of comics, it seemed to me that even then, ten years ago, it was segmenting down very unhealthy lines. On the one hand, there were the "worthy" graphic novels— books which tried to address serious themes, but which seemed to take a perverse pride in being badly drawn and looking down their noses at anything resembling a fun story. At the other end of the spectrum, there were the mainstream superhero comics from DC and Marvel. Typically, superhero comics had very high production values but, for the most part, they tended to be all superficial gloss and no substance. It was as if Watchmen and DKR had never happened!

So, at one level, Shades was a conscious attempt to show that the two need not be mutually exclusive; to show that a graphic novel can be thought-provoking and fun—even in the superhero genre!

SP!: WHO WERE/ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE SUPERHEROES?

DB: Number one has to be Batman. As I've said many times before, Adam West's Batman was largely responsible for getting me into comics as a kid, Tim Burton's Batman got me back into comics as an adult, and Frank Miller's Batman made me want to write my own!

Wonder Woman is high on the list, too. I really don't understand why so many writers seem to have trouble with her. She has a rich back-story, three of the most iconic superpowers (flight, speed and strength), cool equipment and—at least originally— a strong supporting cast. I think part of the problem might be that too many writers focus on her symbolic qualities, rather than simply writing her as a person. If I'm allowed a third, I'll also add The Flash. He only has the one superpower and I have nothing but admiration for the writers who continually manage to invent new ways for him to use that power.

SP!: THE WAY THE SECOND VOLUME WRAPS UP, IT SEEMS LIKE YOU MAY HAVE A FEW MORE STORIES TO TELL IN THAT UNIVERSE. ANY PLANS FOR FUTURE INSTALLMENTS? WILL THEY FOLLOW A SIMILAR FORMAT?

DB: Not really. Shades was conceived as a graphic novel, with the emphasis on the word "novel"! It has its own beginning, middle and end. Back when I started, I did have vague ideas of doing a sequel but, by the time the work was finally completed, I felt that I'd said everything that needed to be said about these characters. It might be fun to do some short stand-alone stories at some stage. Boo and the Shaman have been around for thousands of years, so there's always the possibility of exploring the roles they might have played at key events in British history. Having lived with Shades for ten years, though, I'm more interested in moving on to something entirely new right now.

SP!: WHAT OTHER PROJECTS ARE ON THE HORIZON?

DB: Back when I was working on Shades, I began a couple of other mid-length projects. One was a vampire story called Hunted. I started it long before the likes of True Blood and Twilight made vampires all the rage, but unfortunately, the artist had to leave the project for personal reasons, so it never got finished. The other was a fantasy story (strictly elf- and orc-free!) called The Spires. That one, I had to abandon due to personal reasons of my own. If I can find suitable artists willing to pick up the baton on those two, I'd like to see them through to completion at some stage.

For the time being, though, I'm putting my energies into a novel (you know, one of those "all words and no pictures" type of novels!) It's called Abhorrent Practices and, as with Shades, I want it to work on more than one level. I want it to explore some of the serious issues surrounding assisted suicide, but at the same time, I want people to be able to read it as a fun fantasy adventure, full of swords and sorcery, strange lands, and weird creatures. I don't know if I can make it work, but it should be fun trying!

SP!: WHERE CAN FANS FIND YOUR WORK?

DB: Shades is available either in print or as a PDF. Readers in the US can order it from IndyPlanet (http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product_brand=BrokenVoiceComics). Readers in the UK or Europe can also order from IndyPlanet, of course, but they'll probably find it quicker and maybe even a little bit cheaper to order from Comicsy (http://www.comicsy.co.uk/brokenvoice/).

The first part of Hunted and the first two parts of The Spires are available, along with some shorter stories, to read for free at my website, Broken Voice Comics (http://www.brokenvoice.co.uk/).

The first three chapters of Abhorrent Practices can be read at DeviantArt (http://dajb.deviantart.com/art/Abhorrent-Practices-Chapter-1-255855750).

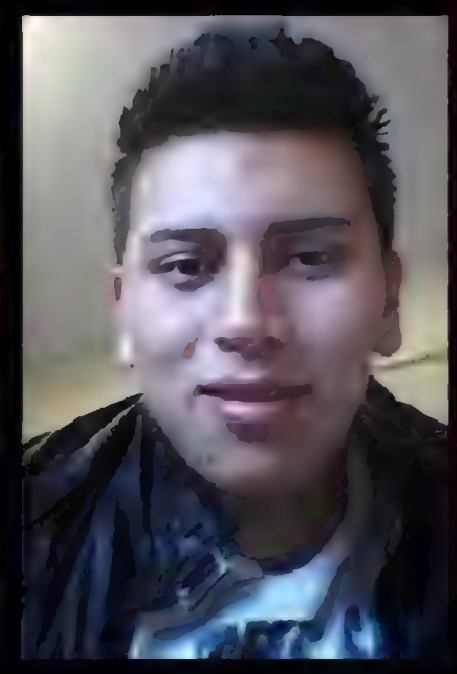
SP!: ANY UPCOMING APPEARANCES IN THE NEAR FUTURE FOR YOU?

DB: I've been thinking about that a lot recently. I didn't want to do it until I had both volumes of Shades in print but, now that I finally do, the idea of doing a short tour of a few US conventions next year is kind of appealing. Being based in the UK, the cost of transport and accommodation is a serious consideration at this point, but I haven't ruled it out!

A Story and Time to Tell It

Vinton Heuck & Byron Penaranda

and their epic fantasy, "Mabigon"



By: Jennifer Vanderbeek

Many a creator has had to eke out time to work on personal projects sandwiched between work and personal demands. How more difficult might it be if your passion for your day job overlaps those of the side projects? Co-creators Vinton Heuck and Byron Penaranda are what many would consider "living the dream" in their positions as director and storyboard artist, respectively, for Hasbro's Transformers animated series. And, yet, they still dream of creator-owned projects, namely their twist on the Arthurian legend Mabigon.

Vinton's personal story is a common one: young comic book fan has his first comic book bullied right out of his hands, cue lifelong obsession and a desire to create. After all, what we create cannot be taken from us, not really. Heuck was a Spider-Man fan, while Penaranda preferred the classic Curt Swan Superman. Both share a love of European myth and fantasy, which is where much of the inspiration for Mabigon comes from: a scoop of Excalibur, a dash of Tolkien, and a healthy dose of a "little-known movie called Hearts and Armor." The two met while working for Sony Animation in the late 90s. At that point, Byron already had a character in mind, the warrior Shrike, and a notion of a story that Vinton—an accomplished artist in his own right—could build upon as writer.

Mabigon is an epic fantasy, so the first volume is really just a first chapter of a much larger story. We have many more planned. As someone who works in the entertainment industry, I would love to see it cross over into film or television, but that isn't our focus. I would also like to pen a novelization or even a series based on our story some day, but I suspect I will be busy directing for some time to come.

Describing anything as 'Arthurian' leads a listener down a very familiar path. Heuck is quick to point that Mabigon, despite its initial inspiration, is not a retelling of the same stories we've heard before. Instead, the world in which their story takes place

is tied to the "Arthurian legends of our world through the realm of Faerie," allowing the reader to start with a basic understanding of the world, but leaving plenty of room for the storytellers to spin their tale. Vinton describes the working relationship between himself and his co-creator as "seamless," the holy grail

WE SPREAD OUT INTO A WEDGE FORMATION AS WE PUSH TOWARDS THE PRINCESS.
THE DEVIL'S OWN! THEY MUST BE.' I SEE THAT VORTIGAN HAS CHOSEN NOT TO PAY MY RANSOM AFTER ALL.
IF I AM TO BE SENT TO HELL THIS NIGHT, I WILL MAKE SURE YOU WILL BE JOINING ME, GIRL.
SHRIKE! THEIR CHIEFTAIN THREATENS THE PRINCESS. FEAR WE SHALL NOT MAKE IT IN TIME!
HOLD YOUR GROUND HERE!
I WILL DEAL WITH HIM PERSONALLY.
NO TIME TO THINK NOW. ONLY AC"..
MY SWORD FLASHES IN GREAT SILVER ARCS, REAPING ITS BLOODY HARVEST.
BUT I THINK ONLY OF MY MISSION AT HAND AS I LEAVE A TRAIL BEHIND ME OF SEVERED LIMBS AND RENT FLESH.

WHO IS THAT MAN?
THEIR LEADER, MY LORD. IT MUST BE.
THEY CALL HIM SHRIKE.
I REMEMBER THE DREAM.
I LOSE MYSELF IN IT MOMENTARILY--
DRIFTING DOWN INTO THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH WHERE THE DRAGON'S PRESENCE CAN BE MOST FELT.
THEN I LET IT FILL ME...
IMPOSSIBLE.
WHAT IN THE NAME OF--

(if you'll pardon the expression) of creative workflow, as many artists—even those with the best of intentions—find collaborations contentious, more often than not. Having spent time at the drawing table, Vinton is able to tailor his writing to a format another artist can easily work from, but trusts Byron implicitly with the art duties.

As of this issue, you can find the first 22 pages of Mabigon on their website [http://www.mabigon.com/], dropping you into the middle of a conflict that hints at the story yet to come. Since completing those pages (with two different colorists), they have switched tactics and begun sharing pages in rougher, sketched form via their Facebook fan page [https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mabigon/164115973744175?ref=br_tf]. With conversations frequently occurring via social media over comment sections these days, the platform allows the creators to be available to their fans and easily post updates without having to spend precious time wrangling code on their own website.

The first volume of many, Book One is estimated at 60 pages. The creators' next hurdle to face is finding someone to complete the coloring and produce the book, which is where Coran Stone (storyboard artist with Film Roman Studios, formerly of WB Classic Animation) and an upcoming Kickstarter come in. Stone has signed on for final colors, but Heuck will be asking fans of the work in progress to help bring the book to completion, and maybe even give them a head start on Book Two!

We will do special printings and hardcover editions for those who help fund our Kickstarter, and they will get a digital pdf, but for now, we are not trying to cover the cost of large print run. We want to look at the best options once the book is done.

With ties to the mainstream art and animation world, readers might wonder why the creators haven't looked into traditional publishing for Mabigon. It's not out of the question, of course, and Image Comics has expressed interest in the work in the past, but Heuck's goal has always been "to exercise [his] creativity in the way [he] dreamed of as kid: writing and sometimes drawing [his] own stories for the entertainment of others." Self-publishing undeniably offers that freedom in ways traditional publishing often cannot, but at a cost. The author is leaving both doors open for now.

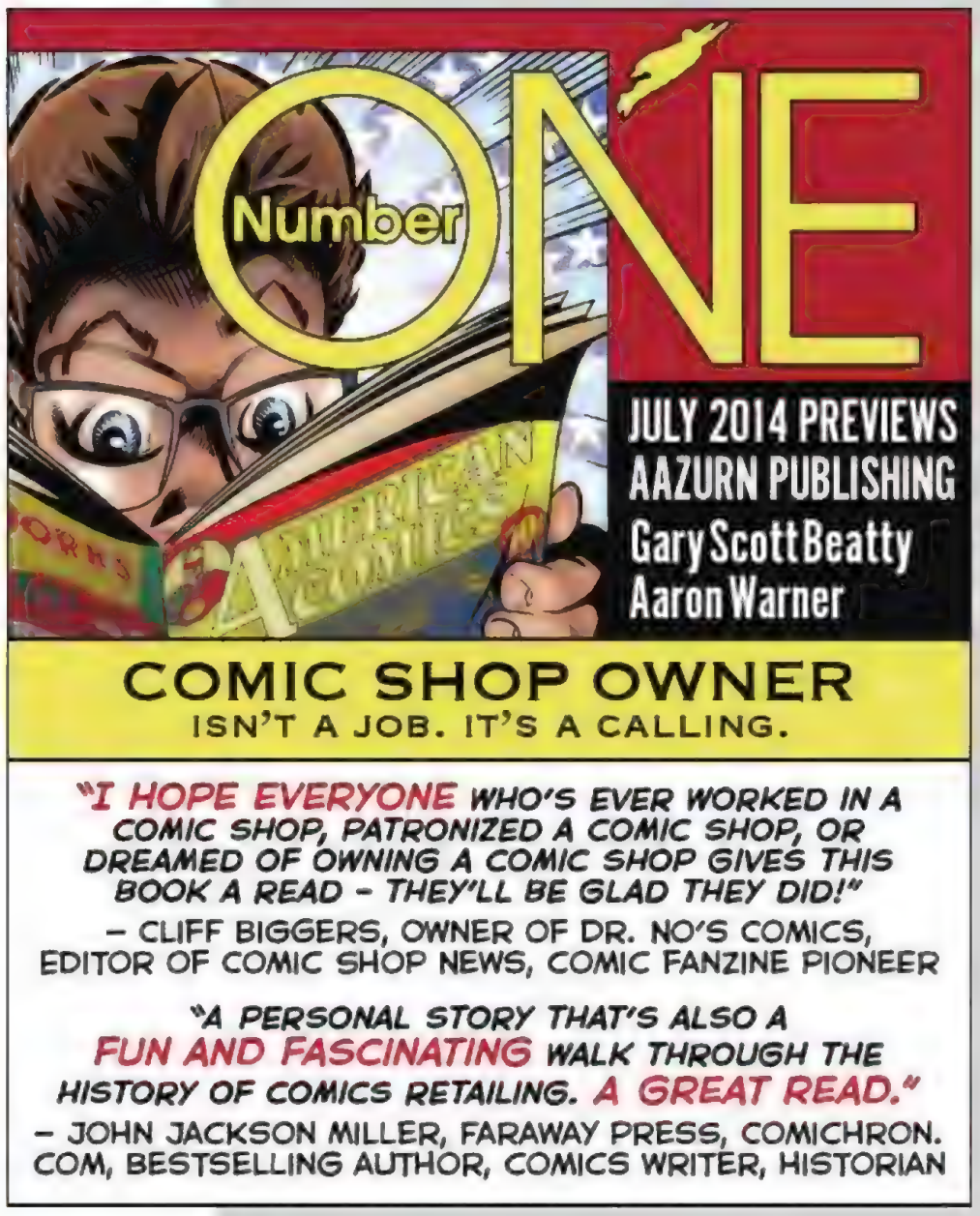
The goal of all creators is to get our work out where people can see and enjoy it. When we, as a group, want to make that

our life's work instead of a side project, there is a bottom line to consider. Whether that line is better served by traditional publication routes, self-publishing, or choosing to work with a small, independent press that falls somewhere in the middle, can only be answered when the work is complete and the landscape is clear. Self-publishing takes a great deal of resources: money, time, specialized skills, physical space (depending on inventory needs) and many other facets come into play. Sometimes a desire to do it oneself is overruled by the demands a creator's daily life imposes.

Wherever "Mabigon" finds its eventual outlet, one thing is certain: there is always more story to tell.

Jennifer Vanderbeek is the author and illustrator of What to Feed Your Raiding Party, the comic book cookbook for gamers, and self publishes under Random Acts Comics from her home in Tallahassee, Florida.

BOOM
WHAT MANNER OF DEMON ARE YOU?
NOT A DEMON, LORD BRAK, MERELY YOUR DEATH.
WE WILL SEE, OUTLANDER.
WE WILL SEE!
AS BAN AND THE GUARDS CLOSE IN, I REALIZE THAT I MUST END THIS QUICKLY.
AS MUCH AS I MIGHT WISH OTHERWISE...
LOOK AT ME ME. DO YOU REMEMBER?
"LIFE EXACTS VENGEANCE LIKE A SHRIKE IN A THORN-BUSH."
NO.
I DON'T BELIEVE IT.
BELIEVE.


Number ONE
JULY 2014 PREVIEWS
AAZURN PUBLISHING
Gary Scott Beatty
Aaron Warner
COMIC SHOP OWNER
ISN'T A JOB. IT'S A CALLING.
"I HOPE EVERYONE WHO'S EVER WORKED IN A COMIC SHOP, PATRONIZED A COMIC SHOP, OR DREAMED OF OWNING A COMIC SHOP GIVES THIS BOOK A READ - THEY'LL BE GLAD THEY DID!"
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The Pop Report

Looking at the Top 5 of various distribution outlets

By: Ian Shires

Hello again, everyone, and welcome to the Pop Report. I've been digging into the places people are selling their stuff and thinking about why and how things become popular. This month, I am heading into the heart of it: what is popular where? And then, I am going to tack on a new layer to it and we're going to start presenting quick looks at what is new, and where to go to check it out. There is so much stuff coming out from so many places, that I am sure that it will be hard for us to show everything right here in the mag... We will have to develop as we go, so we can fairly, and with a level playing field, give all publishers the same opportunity to get seen by our audience. That's important because, while we are interested in what is popular and how it got that way, so that we can pass that information on to others to help them win their audiences, we do not want to create an atmosphere where anyone feels like their work should not be a part of our listings. I mean, we want to present minicomics, digests, full sizers, and graphic novels from new and old companies, from the purest of the hobby-level publishers to the most hopeful of the shooting-for-professional career level. Frankly, SP! maintains that art is art and it all deserves the same chance to find the readers that will like it.

We are working to set up automatic reporting of new books with many online distribution spots, but if you want to make sure your new releases get into our presentation system, no matter where they are available online, head to: http://www.selfpubmag.com/Submitting.htm, and we will be able to take it from there.

So, let's take a quick look at the popular books at Indyplanet (http://www.indyplanet.com/). I have noticed that both their NEW list and their Popular list are exactly the same, so I am not sure whether their filters are functioning properly. I will treat the popularity list as correct, as that is what they are currently showing to the public. A title called City of Myth #2, by Apollo Villa-Real, Larry Ridlen, and Chandar Wilson tops their list. It's a superhero book. It looks fairly average from the cover, so somewhere, these guys are doing some great marketing, if they are the #1 seller. That alone makes me want to seek them out and see what they are doing right. In second and fourth place is a manga style graphic novel series called Druid City 1and 2, by Jeremy Satcher. From the samples and info, it looks decent: something the artist has obviously put everything they have into. Their #3 seller comes from a creator we have an article coming up on: Cruel Production's Colonel Cruel #1 by Aghori Shaivite. It's only a 12-page B+W, and sports a $2.50 cover price, but the title fits in with a number of other titles from the publisher. Rounding out the top 5 at Indyplanet is Amen-The Chosen One #1. This particular comic definitely falls into the hobby level, so I wrote to Indyplanet with the question about whether their Popular list was working. Turns out it is not. They let me now that they are disabling it and will bring it back when it is indeed working again...So we'll leave the books we looked at, as they don't deserve to be deleted from the article for a faulty code issue. Lord knows I've had to fix website code now and then. Kudos to Indyplanet for being solidly responsive.

Drive-Thru Comics (http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/) is a bit more sophisticated in their display, showing you new books since your last visit, hottest titles, editor picks, and more 0151which makes it a solid shopping experience. Right now, we'll just take a look at their Top 5 as well. Exalted: Tale of the Visiting Flare is #1 right now, and sounds like part of a continuing property with a decent fan base. Next is Star Power #5, which I find notable for being on a top-selling list at its fifth issue. Looks like a cool series with good art. In third is Zenith Comics Presents: Heroic #1, a new ongoing title, presenting stories from the Zenith Universe. Not currently familiar with it, but with some good cover art, and colors by SP! contributor Gary Beatty, it definitely perks my interest. Girl Genius rounds out the top 5 here with two volumes of material, over

360 pages of reading total in volumes 11 and 12, by Kaja Foglio, Phil Foglio, and Cheyenne Wright. That literally speaks volumes about the strength and popularity of this indie property and all publishers could do well to study what Airship Entertainment is doing right.

I am going to skip going through the "Top issues" at Graphicly (http://graphicly.com/top), because it is so dominated by the mainstream. I mean, their first book is Walking Dead Vol.1,an Image book—and they certainly don't need our promotion. Yes, us publishers should know and study such successful titles, learn how they got there, etc., but to put a list that starts THERE, next to places that are devoted more to the indies that do not have huge multimillion dollar studios attached isn't our intention here.

The same goes for Comicfix (http://comicsfix.com/), as they don't have a "Top seller" system at this time, only new releases, and genre choices. So, I can't look at top sellers there. I did note that one of the new arrivals there is actually a book I handled the original printing for, probably eight years ago: The Chair from Alterna Comics. Kinda made me smile to see that book still making rounds.

Ok, so that's going to be our look at what is popular this month. I am also thinking that this might be the last installment of the POP Report—that a different direction can (and should) be taken, to help focus on the new. We have seen that there does not seem to be ANY rhyme or reason to what is a top seller at any specific place, past the fact that the publisher has driven their sales to a certain spot better than the other publishers and there is no correlation between sites. If something is available at both places, it can be popular at one and a flop at the other, depending on which place the publisher has directed their fans. Popularity continues to be an elusive shadow that people chase and, once reached, evaporates like vapor near a flame. Winning a fan base that will support a publisher to a level that it's a career, well, we have no real numbers from anyone to say that is happening for anyone short of those Diamond-carried titles that have survived more than a year. We continue to see way too many really great properties slam up against the reality that there is no one out there doing enough to draw in new readers to a level where indie publishing can be a career choice. Self Publisher! Magazine is dedicated to breaking that code. Figuring it all out. Look for some evolution on these ideas next month.

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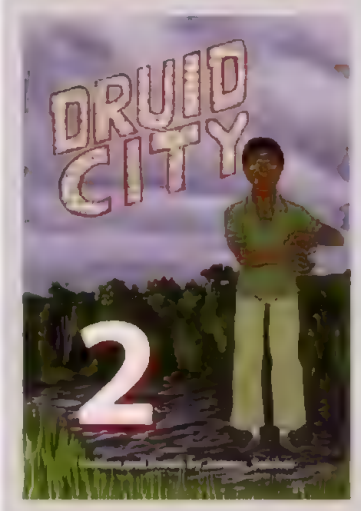
Cruzader #1 - 140 page Full color graphic novel by Omar Morales, from The Force Media LLC. $19.99 + Shipping. www.theforcemedia.com/order

City of Myth #2 - 28 page Full size, full color book by Apollo Villa-Real, Larry Ridlen, and Chandar Wilson, from Ruxunn. $4.99. http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product=109289

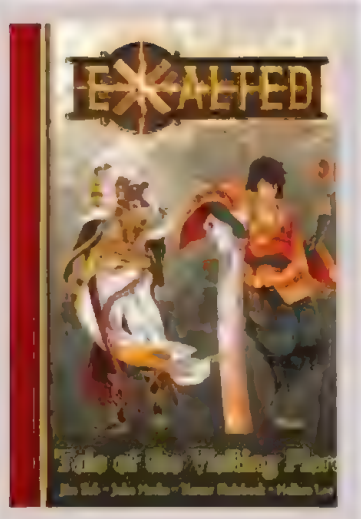
Druid City #1 - 204 page Manga size B+W book by Jeremy Satcher. $9.00. http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product=107640



Druid City #2 - 226 page Manga size B+W book by Jeremy Satcher. $10.00. http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product=109084

Colonel Cruel #1 - 12 page Full size B+W book by Aghori Shaivite, Eemil Friman, and Naldridge. $2.50. http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product=110007

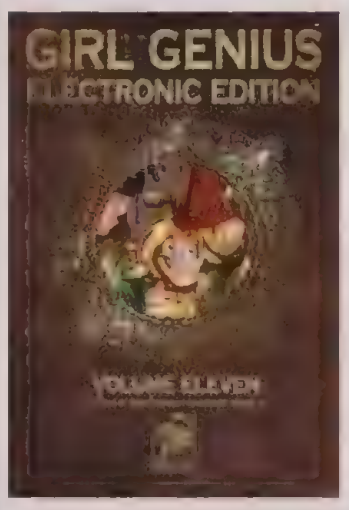
Amen - The Chosen One #1 - 16 page Full size, full color comic by Chester A. Colston, from Independent Authority Comics. $4.00. http://www.indyplanet.com/front/?product=109675



Exalted: Tale of the Visiting Flare - 26 page Full size, full color comic by Jim Zubkavich, John Morke, Hanzo Steinbach, and Melissa Lee. From Onyx Path Publishing. $2.99 PDF, $7.99 printed. http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/product/128873/Exalted-Tale-of-the-Visiting-Flare

Star Power #5 - 27 page PDF, Full color comic by Michael Terracciano and Garth Graham. From GT Comics. $2.99.http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/product/130100/StarPower-5

Zenith Comics Presents: Heroic #1 - 28 page PDF, Full color comic by Andrew Collas, Alex Williamson, Luca Cicchitti, Oliver Castaneda, Gary Beatty, and Jeff Chapman. From Zenith Comics. "Pay what you want" option.http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/product/129683/Zenith-Comics-Presents-Heroic--First-Issue



Girl Genius Vol.11 - 172 page PDF, Full color by Kaja Foglio, Phil Foglio, and Cheyenne Wright. From Airship Entertainment. $23.00 (on sale now for $7.99). http://comics.drivethrustuff.com/product/110684/Girl-Genius-Volume-Eleven

Indie Advice:
Simple Promotion Steps

By: Gary Scott Beatty

Gary Scott Beatty runs Aazurn Publishing, publisher of "Indie Comics Magazine" (http://indiecomicsmagazine.com/) and the comic book retailer one-shot "Number One," (available for order in July 2014's Previews catalog). The first alternative comic he produced—they were called "underground" then—was done on his high school's mimeograph machine, after hours, without permission. His Xeric Grant Winner "Jazz: Cool Birth," a jazz club murder mystery, was inspired by 50s album cover designs. He also colors and letters for the industry. Find out more at http://garyscottbeatty.com/.

Maybe you pay a marketing firm to keep your name in the public eye, but most of us indie creators depend solely upon our own devices for promotions.

Becoming savvy about good marketing practices will put you in a better position to compete with the big publishing houses who, let's face it, will be able to outspend you every time. That means you need to be smart about your time and money. If you take nothing else out of this article, remember this phrase: target market.

TARGET MARKET.

Your target market is the market, that is, the buyers and potential buyers of your book. Put thought into who these people are and keep them in mind every time you decide to spend time or money promoting your project.

There are many places to spend money advertising comics. When considering shelling out your hard-earned coin, always ask the question, "Does this reach my target market?" You will be surprised how often the answer to this question is, "No."

Flip it around, and you can use this knowledge of your target market to promote your own books. For example, I chose the name "Indie Comics Magazine" for Aazurn Publishing's flagship pub, because that is exactly what it is: a large publication full of independent comics. Our target market is readers interested in independent comic book stories. I could have called it "Megacosm" or something, but that would not have communicated, simply and clearly, what we are.

That's exactly what every stage of your marketing should do: communicate, simply and clearly, what your book is. People are too busy and impatient to dig through paragraphs of information. If you make them work at it, they will go away, and your marketing fails.

PARAGRAPH DESCRIPTION

I cannot stress how important it is for you to write and memorize a short paragraph description of your book. In the movie business, this is called a pitch. It grabs your audience and makes them want more.

Short is the key here. Picture yourself behind a table at a convention. Someone comes to the table and asks about your book. You reply with one sentence that interests and intrigues them. They ask questions, they open the book to look at it, you make a sale.

Now picture the same scenario. You reply with a comprehensive plot outline naming every character, city and star system in your book. Around the fourth paragraph, their eyes glaze over—and you're not even into the second chapter.

"Jazz: Cool Birth" is a murder mystery in a 50s jazz club, with art inspired by 50s album cover designs.

As of this writing, I'm still developing the pitch for "Number One," a comic retailer story exploring 50 years of comic book history. The tag line is, "'Comic shop owner' isn't a job, it's a CALLING." By the time you see an ad, or see me at a convention, I'll have it down.

This paragraph is every bit as important as the name of your book. Used together, with a "closer" (Where do I buy this book?), it steers potential buyers toward your book.

Do you have your target market in mind?

Good. Next are some tips you can use without spending money. They take time to set up, but once they are in place, you have a system that can be added and altered without hardship.

THE LIST

All marketing begins with a list. You can't get more targeted than people who have signed up to hear about what you do. There are many ways to LEGALLY collect emails for your fan list (No one likes spam and if you spam emails, you will drive fans away). Some legitimate websites are set up to help, like MailChimp. The Indie Comics Magazine Fan List can be joined at http://indiecomicsmagazine.com/.

Note that the time to start a mailing list is not when you release your book. You need to build a mailing list over time. Today is a good day to start.

Facebook is, essentially, a list that can be used for your marketing. What's great is that you can post video, pictures, etc., over time. Schedule posts so you can spread them out over the last three weeks before your release to reach the widest audience, and keep it entertaining.

I discovered that if I join Groups on Facebook, I greatly expand the number of people who see my posts. Just be sure your posts are relevant to the Group—read the "About" section before joining. Then, post to your timeline, and then "share" that post with your groups. The more "likes" and "shares" a post gets, the higher and longer it stays on the page.

Post artwork and/or writing (Strong panels of art are better than whole pages—make sure they kick!). Fans love to see sketches and preliminary drawings.

Be sure your paragraph description (above) is at the end of anything you post!

CALENDAR SCHEDULE

People tell me all the time how organized I am. I'm really not! I simply keep a large desk calendar with notes on it. I refer to mine every day, so I don't skip important tasks.

I have scheduled dates to send news releases, post to Facebook, send to my fan email list, post on chat rooms, etc. If I'm not deep into talking up the latest Aazurn Publishing book, I'm letting potential customers know what I do. There's always something on the calendar!

Review copies and news releases should go out to media weeks before customers can order from Diamond. (Note, the date Previews is delivered to comic shops is never the first day of the month!) If your publisher sends news releases, ask how you can help expand their efforts with interviews.

The last two weeks before Previews (or your independent release) is crunch time for reaching readers and your fan base—any earlier and they may forget to order! After Previews is in comic shops, contact retailers you've established relationships with to see what you can do to help them sell books (and convince them to order).

EMAILS AND CORRESPONDENCE

You are in business! Unless you are replying to some rabid fanboy, your full name, email, and website should appear on every correspondence. (Phone number is up to you.) Make it easy for people to get back to you!

Place your paragraph description (above) at the end of all your correspondence, beneath your address and contact information. I save mine on my desktop so I can pull it up quickly and easily. This is the paragraph I've been using:

Order the comic book retailer story Number One in July 2014's Previews comic book catalog, under Aazurn Publishing!

When Diamond lists it, I'll add the order number. Nothing confusing about that paragraph!

GOOGLE ALERTS

Track when your name comes up online with Google Alerts! I have alerts set up for my name and the names of my products. Google sends me an email when their crawlers run across them. Without this, I would have never heard about any of my online reviews. I'm also able to respond if someone mentions me in a chat room. You never know where your name is going to pop up online! Honestly, this should be mandatory for anyone tracking their career. http://www.google.com/alerts

There is no secret to marketing. These are the same systems Don Draper had in the 60s, using modern tools. Be clear, concise, and entertaining, and appear in as many places as you can. Always conclude with a way to "close" the sale.

Spend money if you can, but the free and organizational tips in this article are the foundation for any marketing program. Use them!

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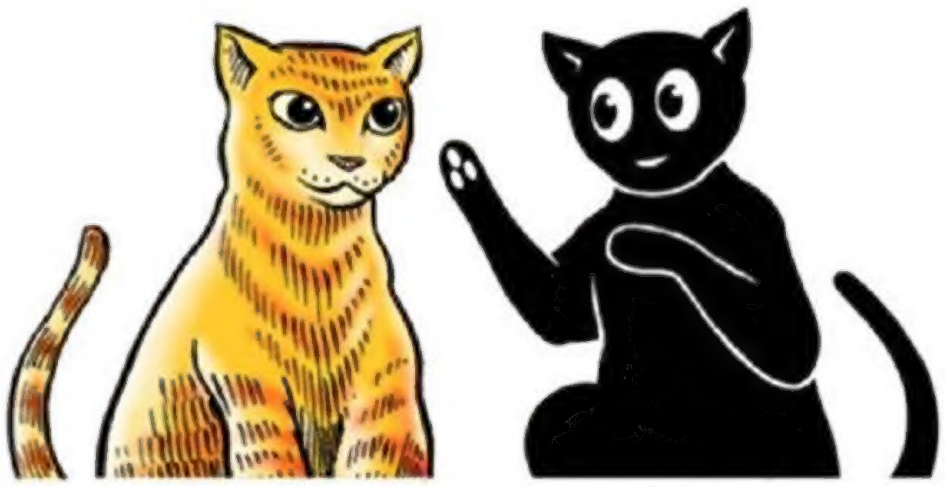

Created by Barry Corbett

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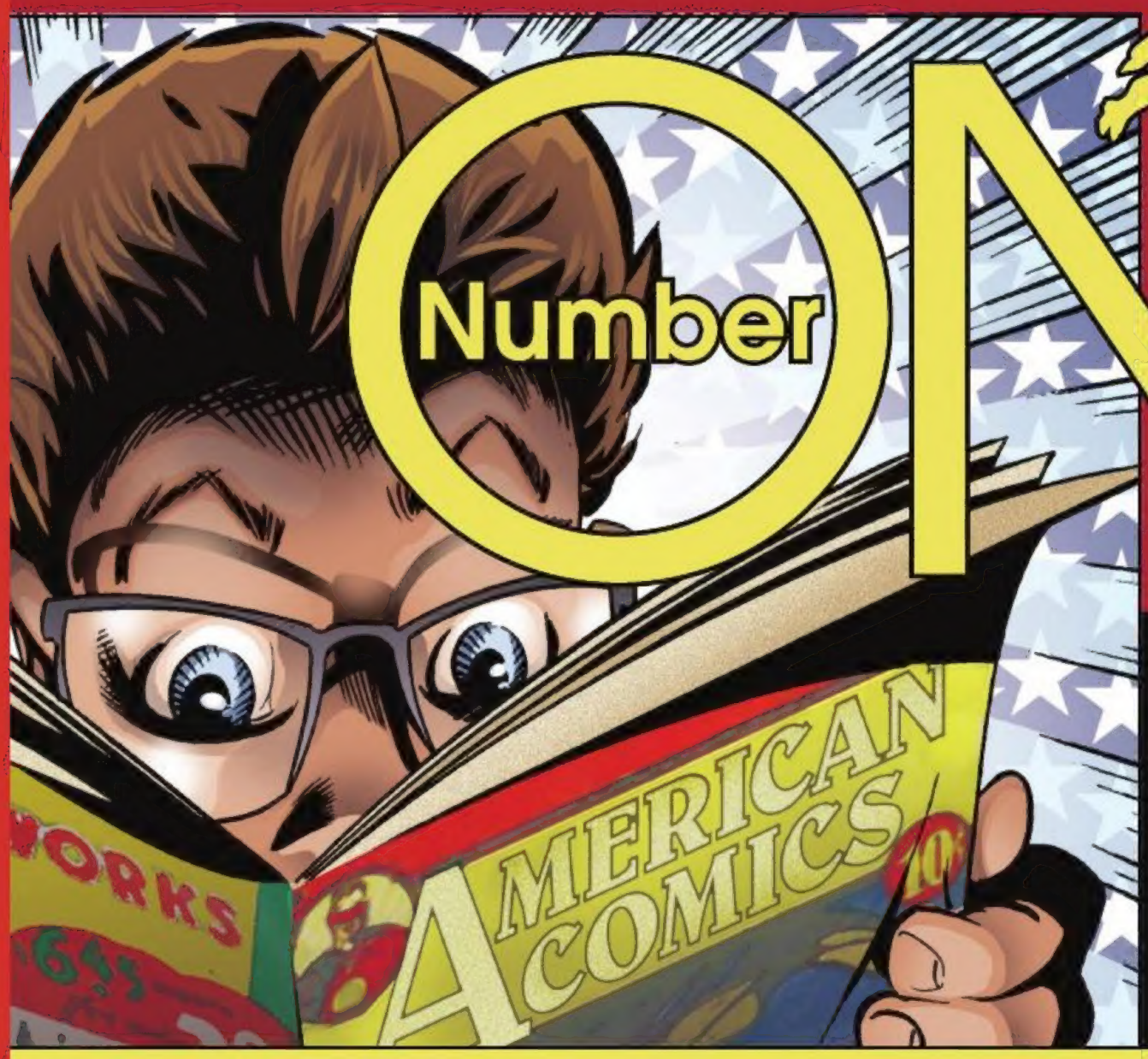

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